CHAPTER 6

CONTEXTS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
SELECTED ISSUES

Corcoran (1995) describes professional development as any activity that impacts upon
and influences a range of cognate areas concerned with teaching and learning. More
specifically he argues that it should deepen teachers’ subject-content and pedagogical
knowledge, allow for the critical evaluation of teaching standards as well as
curriculum content and reform and lastly, encourage the development, practice and
reflection of new approaches to teaching. In a less normative vein (though nonetheless
equally comprehensive) Guskey (2000) defines professional development as all:

*processes and activities designed to enhance the professional
knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in
turn, improve the learning of students* (Guskey, 2000: 16).

Both of these conceptualisations are consistent with the three interconnected contexts
explored in the present evaluation, namely:

- teacher context
- school context
- system context.

These contexts should inform evaluation of the impact of any professional development
process. In this chapter, these contexts are used as conceptual ‘markers’ to structure
discussion of the impact of the PCSP described already in Chapter 5. Overall, the
chapter sets a selection of the evaluation findings in the context of what is known about
professional development more generally in the literature. It is not designed to be a
comprehensive review of *each* of the findings of the evaluation: rather it draws
parallels between practice in Ireland and the wider professional development and school
reform literature in relation to a small selection of relevant issues.
6.1 Teacher Context – Teachers’ Value and Belief Systems

6.1.1 Teachers’ existing knowledge and skills

There is an awareness among PCSP planners that as a latent strategy to bring about change, teachers and principals needs to develop a meaningful sense of ownership of the curriculum. In this there is an implicit understating that a top down model of implementation will not generate change in practice simply because teachers and principals are told to do so. In short, ‘top down’ models conceive of the change process as being hierarchical and linear and are often encapsulated within a rigid division of labour between those who formulate change and those who have to implement it. This conundrum of how to implement firstly, a curriculum which may not, from the perspective of some practising teachers, originate with teachers whilst secondly, trying to avoid excessive prescription and very possibly instigate passive or even active resistance to change as a consequence of that is illustrated by the following comment:

*If a school has embedded good practice, or what it considers good practice, there’s a greater reluctance to move to, to what is, what was propounded as better...because they had such a small glimpse of what was better, just one, possibly two days or three if it was Gaeilge, you know, to make changes to that unless they had been moving in that direction already or unless what was being offered was sufficiently attractive in a cohesive, integrated way for them to make a total shift from what they considered existing good practice to what was being suggested better practice (System Planner, Group I).*

The inference here is that practitioners need to be convinced that what is being offered is ‘better’ than their current ‘best practice.’ The process involves convincing teachers that the new curriculum and all its attendant parts merit changes to their established practices. It also rests on a model of individual behaviour which is essentially rational and that practitioners, when presented with the appropriate evidence in a credible and trustworthy way (i.e. via the PCSP seminars and RCSS), will detach themselves from old practices and adopt the new.

6.1.2 Meaning/sense making

This perspective can suggest that there is only one way of interpreting the curriculum. This interpretation is probably too simplistic. Spillane (2000) and Spillane, Reiser and
Reimer (2002) describe change as brought about according to how it is understood by those who are ultimately charged with its execution:

*If implementing agents construct ideas that misconstrue policymakers' intent, then implementation failure is likely. Implementation failure in this case results not because implementation agents reject the reform ideas advanced, . . .but because they understand them differently* (Spillane et al., 2002: 419).

What Spillane et al. are suggesting is that change is a negotiated and interpretative process and not simply a function of being a direct translation from what is written in the ensemble of curriculum documents to classroom practice. In unpacking this line of reasoning further Bowe et al. (1992) argue that:

*Practitioners do not confront policy texts as naive readers, they come with histories, with experiences, with values and purposes of their own. . .parts of texts will be rejected, selected out, ignored, deliberately misunderstood. . .furthermore, yet again, interpretation will be a matter of struggle. Different interpretations will be in contest, as they relate to different interests* (Bowe and Ball with Gold, 1992: 22).

### 6.1.3 Ownership of the curriculum

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the PCSP system planners were aware of this process of contextually mediated interpretation of the seminar materials and the curriculum per se. In this sense, a curriculum that draws, at least in part, on constructivist and sociocultural constructivist theories of learning should reasonably be expected to be ‘read’ in more than one way. Interpretations of curriculum can vary and as argued above, are mediated and enacted through current practice and value systems. For example, differences in interpretation hinge on issues around the pragmatics of small group work in classrooms some of which may be architecturally incapable of facilitating such work, to the very subject areas themselves. In the case of the subjects themselves, some of the teachers in the present evaluation who participated in the focus groups were not quite sure why some subjects (for example, Drama, SPHE) are included in the curriculum.

In discussing Mathematics, some of the teachers’ focused on normative assumptions as to what inspectors want from them, rather than what is appropriate for children in their classes: "*they expect three and a half to four hours of maths a week .. they want us to..."
have everything perfect” (Teacher A, TFG3). There was also some evidence that, in cases, teachers have reservations about what they are being asked to teach: “we’re gaining an awful lot of surface-level stuff but we’ve got no profound roots in anything anymore” (Teacher F, TFG3).

The focus groups raised interesting issues in relation to the extent to which teachers themselves believe that they “own” the curriculum and the process of professional development. Some teachers believe there is not much change in the curriculum. Others are drawing heavily on commercial and trainer/cuiditheoir-promoted strategies and resources as a means of implementing curriculum strands, rather than engaging with the curriculum themselves to construct their own knowledge of the curriculum, in line with the principles of the curriculum itself.

The evaluation found that the PCSP seminars and site-based support observed reflected an unexpected level of directive methodology. This is evident from the emphasis on providing teachers with ready-made strategies, resources, plans and repertoires for immediate use in classroom. Given the tendency towards commercialisation of the curriculum in the shape of textbooks, commercially-produced resources and curriculum packs, there needs to be greater balance between supporting teachers in their own contextualised ‘deconstruction’ of the curriculum and with a corpus of off-the-peg resources. Greater care should be taken to ensure that teachers develop their higher order, constructive or critical analysis skills – all of which are fundamental learning objectives of the Primary School Curriculum itself. Teachers’ long term needs may be best served by support initiatives that model such critical problem-solving and constructivist approaches, and which facilitates teachers in becoming more self sufficient in addressing their own professional development needs. As expressed by a participant in a focus group with DES inspectors, an over-dependency on the PCSP may contribute to ‘learned helplessness’ on the part of teachers. Of course, any such learned helplessness, if prevalent, may simply be a phase through which some teachers pass. Anecdotal evidence from a similar programme of professional development in Northern Ireland suggests that there may be a critical number of interactions between teachers and a school-based support service, after which teachers regain more autonomy in their professional learning. This issue warrants closer longitudinal scrutiny in respect of the work of the PCSP.
6.1.4 Career stage of the teacher

The literature on teachers’ learning needs suggests that the career stage of the teacher is a significant factor in teacher learning. Fessler (1995) argues that:

*Teachers experience many shifts in stages throughout their careers, often meandering back and forth between periods of growth and frustration in response to factors in their personal and organizational lives (Fessler, 1995: 171-172).*

Writing more recently in the Irish context, Sugrue et al. (2001) note that professional learning needs to be sensitive to and cognisant of career stage and teaching context. Mirroring the work of Leithwood (1990) and Huberman (1993), Fessler outlines a series of stages in a teacher’s career, all of which contribute to different learning needs for teachers at different times in their careers. Such analyses suggest that learning needs and a belief in learning and change is influenced by the career stage of the teacher. This has implications for professional development programmes which are uniformly aimed at teachers across the career spectrum. A mismatch between perceived learning needs, as identified by a central authority, and real learning needs, as understood and experienced by individual teachers will adversely impact upon a teacher’s belief in the change process.

Analysis of the data from the present evaluation presents some evidence of a contrary position, at least in relation to the PCSP. It was found that there was very little difference in the pattern of responses to the questions on ‘satisfaction’ and ‘usefulness’ of the seminars and cuiditheoir support in the teacher questionnaires when disaggregated by experience. This does not necessarily negate the need for more career stage-sensitive forms of professional development as per Sugrue et al.’s (2001) position, but rather it suggests that the PCSP was relatively successful in accommodating the needs of teachers at different stages in their careers. There was some evidence from the seminar observations and associated interviews to suggest, however, that more recently-qualified teachers were not as enthusiastic about the seminars as their more experienced peers.
6.1.5 Teacher needs

A reasonable objective of any support structure should be to enable the recipients to become more autonomous over time in relation to their own professional development. The findings of this evaluation indicate that this may not be happening yet. This is not surprising bearing in mind that the curriculum is not yet fully implemented and that a pre-planned programme of professional development is still underway. With the exception of whole-school activities geared towards planning, the evaluation found relatively little clear evidence of increases in teacher and school capacity to advance their own teaching and learning processes on their own, despite the views of members of the RCSS to the contrary. This is supported by the finding that teachers and principals are very much in favour of the RCSS service because it lessens the need for teachers and principals to seek out information for themselves.

Some of the information provided at present by cuiditheoirí could easily be accessed from a central location, such as a website, or contained in information packs or bulletins periodically sent to schools for teachers to access. For example, expanded and more frequent use might be made of the PCSP Newsletter in communicating information to schools. Cuiditheoirí could then be more effectively deployed working directly with teachers in class to apply this information to their own teaching context. The evaluation concluded that some of the current efforts of cuiditheoirí are concentrated on supplying relatively low-level assistance to principals and teachers (for example, explaining what is on the website, providing lists of resources and sources). More efficient means for conveying this type of assistance should be devised so that cuiditheoirí can instead concentrate on providing more value-added assistance to schools, such as observing teachers’ pedagogical practice, working with teachers to reflect more fully on their own practice and modifying teaching methodologies.

A significant long-term implication of the programme may be whether or not it has contributed inadvertently to creating a broad dependency culture in the teaching profession generally along the lines that the DES will ‘provide’ professional development for teachers to support changing curriculum. What is perhaps needed more is continuing professional development in which teachers take more responsibility for identifying their needs and taking steps to address them. A very strong viewpoint which emerged from interviews with PCSP planners, but especially from Group I, was
that professional development should no longer be viewed in terms of meeting once-off needs, but be an on-going feature of teachers’ professional life. As such it should become an integral part of not just teacher culture, but also of school culture and organisational norms.

6.2 School Context

6.2.1 The role of the school principal

The school principal occupies a critical and influential position in creating a school culture which can foster or retard change per se. Putting aside the purpose, meaning and value attached to ‘change’, the literature (e.g. Leithwood, 1990; Botello and Glasman, 1999; Wanzare and Ward, 2000; Guskey, 2002; Elmore, 2000; Owen, 2003) on the role of principals in schools indicates that implementation is most successful when school leaders:

- believe professional development for teachers is essential for implementing change
- are focused on the overall purpose of professional development programmes
- ensure that school policies do not conflict with new teaching strategies
- create an atmosphere that encourages teachers to experiment with new ideas without fear of criticism
- provide time and opportunity for teachers to meet and share ideas about new knowledge, skills, strategies etc
- do not overload teachers with classroom assignments
- provide assistance with classroom management skills
- provide, or act as, a mentor
- ensure that sufficient financial and material resources that promote teacher learning are available to teachers.

In the Irish context, the role played by the principal in producing and re-producing the culture of a school which enables change to occur is also recognised by the DES:

*The fundamental aims of in-career professional development programmes are to equip teachers with the capacity to respond*
effectively to major changes in the educational system, including changes in curriculum, teaching methodologies, assessment, school organisation and management, and to provide for teachers’ personal and professional development needs. Ideally, the school climate should be one which welcomes and seeks to manage change and which exemplifies to students how change can be implemented and managed (DES, 1995).

A review by HayGroup Management Consultants (Drea and O’Brien, 2002) of the role of primary school principals in Ireland found that while the principal has a key role to play in the creation of a learning environment in schools, it is a role that requires certain skills and competencies. The report recommends that a framework for developing such skills is critical in order to enable principals to carry out the leadership, and teaching and learning functions of a principal.

The Haygroup report outlined seven key aspects of the role of the primary principal:

1. Leadership: to enable pupils and teachers to ‘maximise their development’
2. Promotion of teaching and learning: to enhance learning outcomes
3. Resource management
4. Human resource management: leadership, motivation, development of all staff
5. Policy formation
6. Administration
7. Managing external relationships.

6.2.2 Developing principals’ knowledge and skills

Drea and O’Brien go on to argue that the above aspects of a principal’s role require the same leadership qualities and competencies expected of any leadership role in any organisation. However, due to the nature of this particular sector the ‘values of learning and personal development...lie at the heart of the role’ (p. 3). Consequently, it is the first and second elements of the role of principal listed above that assume particular importance, and which require specific competencies on the part of the principal. These competencies are: professional expertise, sound inter-personal understanding, team leadership, capacity to develop others, setting appropriate challenges for staff and providing constructive feedback. However, Drea and O’Brien found that many principals do not possess such skills and qualities, nor are they aware of the need to do
so. Many principals believe it is not their place to ‘manage’ staff, due to what is traditionally viewed as the ‘professional independence of individual teachers.’ According to the authors, this is an issue that must be overcome, as managing and developing staff, especially under-performing staff, is a key issue of any leadership position, including that of the principal. The report recommends that all principals be provided with professional development in key areas and skills required for them to carry out their leadership responsibilities, and are enabled to guide, motivate and develop staff, and, in particular, to be able to overcome underperformance.

As outlined in Chapter 2, separate training to equip school principals to support curriculum implementation and teacher development in a way consistent with the literature, was not a feature of the PCSP model. This is despite the fact that many of the system planners interviewed are aware of the critical role of the principal in school change and teacher development. The survey data from principals indicated that separate support focused on the specific needs of the principal teacher would be worthwhile. Those principals participating in focus groups felt that they had been engaged in a process whereby:

*We’ve trained ourselves. . .on School Development Planning, principals had special training and I think there’s a need for us to get it with the curriculum as well. Without a doubt I think that should be a priority* (Teaching Principal B, Focus Group).

In responding to the school questionnaire administrative principals ranked planning the school’s curriculum as the second most important feature of their role, while teaching principals ranked it in third position (for both groups behind ‘assisting children in the school as a whole’). The findings of this evaluation show a clear desire and need among principals for training designed to enable them to effectively support school change and teacher development. A comment made by one principal “I am the curriculum support teacher in the school, it’s as simple as that and always will be” (Teaching Principal B, Focus Group) may however, indicate a reluctance amongst some principals to delegate responsibility for curriculum planning and development to other staff members. This is also suggested by the results from the school questionnaire which show that 15% of administrative principals and 8% of teaching principals have appointed overall curriculum co-ordinators, while 68% of administrative principals and 33% of teaching
principals have delegated responsibility for individual curriculum areas to staff members.

6.2.3 Environment/culture of the school

The nature of the school environment impacts upon a school’s learning needs and failure by a central authority, when promoting change, to recognise the existence of alternative school needs, risks some schools being unable to embrace the change process. Guskey (1995) argues that the context of any one workplace will result in different learning conditions and needs. Professional development processes that work well in one school may not work so well in another due to alternative contexts of place, size, time, people etc, which generate different school learning needs. For example, the dynamics, organisation and culture of a small, rural, one- or two-teacher school may have alternative learning needs to a large, multi-teacher urban school. This issue is explored by Nolan (1998), who examined the learning needs of a one-teacher school in a rural community in New South Wales, Australia, following the introduction of the concept of school self-management. Nolan identifies a number of distinctive features of small, rural primary schools that generate specific learning needs and which, in turn, impact upon the process of change, namely:

- conservative nature of the school community
- workload of teaching principal
- teacher isolation and absence of collegial support.

He suggests that the school occupies a key position in the local community, who often “view the school as their own,” a perspective identified also in the Irish context (Irish Primary Principals’ Network, 2004). According to Nolan:

*To be directed by an outside authority to change anything in their school often results in mistrust and resistance...The close relationship between school and community means that the principal, as well as community members, demands to be convinced of the relevance and necessity of directed change before it will be seriously entertained, let alone accepted* (Nolan, 1998: 269).

In response to these challenges, Nolan suggests the central authority promoting change should take the following course of action to assist the learning process:
• include the local community in education programmes concerning the proposed changes
• increase support for the teaching principal either by appointing extra staff to take over some of the clerical/administrative work, or supplying a substitute teacher to release more time for the principal to conduct leadership duties
• provide funding for provision of video-conferencing, email facilities, and regular conferences between rural schools, to facilitate collegial learning.

Nolan argues that if the above action can be taken, it will overcome many of the challenges experienced by small, rural schools by increasing communication between those affected by changes and by creating learning communities, so that the learning processes of small schools can be promoted.

An example of a professional development programme designed specifically to meet the learning needs of principals of small primary schools in the UK is The Leading Small Primary Schools Pilot Programme (Easton et al, 2003). This was a year-long programme, organised on a partnership basis between the National College for School Leadership, 11 local education authorities and 33 schools. The programme was comprised of a series of workshops and visits to other schools where participants had the opportunity to observe and learn from others in practice, and was delivered by facilitators who were also heads of small primary schools. This, it was found, helped to keep the course content focused on the specific needs of principals in small schools. The participants reported that the opportunity to set their own learning agenda in response to the specific needs of small schools greatly enabled them to take ownership of their learning and increased their motivation to learn.

6.2.4 Tailoring professional development to the school context

The present evaluation found that 75% of respondents to the teacher questionnaire viewed the overall PCSP support programme as of relevance to their own school and class context. Eighty-two percent of teachers believe that the seminars worked well, 77% were generally satisfied and 74% believe that the clustering of schools worked well. There was a general reaction of teacher enthusiasm across all subject areas. In addition, 76% of trainers reported that they were able to tailor seminars to suit school size and 79% reported being able to tailor seminars to suit experienced teachers.
Focus group discussions with teachers and principals suggested, nevertheless, that the provision of support may not have been as contextually appropriate as the initial teacher survey results indicated. Teaching principals involved in the focus groups were strongly of the view that it is very difficult to implement the curriculum with three or four class-levels simultaneously, and suggested that seminars were not differentiated for smaller schools.

Comments by PCSP personnel reveal three ‘belief systems’ in relation to differentiation of the programme of support. These three issues are unpacked further below:

1. The trainers would be aware of different contexts and make adjustments as appropriate on the day.
2. The teachers/staffs would customise the material and ideas themselves, through the planning sessions built into the seminars or through the school-based curriculum planning days.
3. It was really beyond the capacity of any national initiative of the scale of the PCSP to offer seminars tailored to the specific needs and contexts of individual schools and teachers. Therefore, the seminar was a general package designed only for “introducing people to the curriculum” (PCSP co-ordinator) and that differences in contexts are “probably best handled through the support service” (PCSP co-ordinator).

**Trainers are aware of contexts and adjust on the day**

There is no clear evidence in the interviews with system planners of a concerted effort in the design of seminars to differentiate for school context or career stage. There was, instead, an expectation amongst most design team members that trainers would be “aware” or “cognisant” of the contextual factors and respond on the day. However, trainers participating in the focus group revealed that often they did not know in advance to what type of school or group of teachers they would be presenting; a situation that can lead to undue pressure on the trainer and a feeling of being unprepared.

Data from the observations of some seminars by the evaluators, presented in Section 3.3.3 illustrate that almost all trainers modified the seminars to effect appropriate
differentiation. Modifications included omitting topics, changing/reducing activities, adapting slides and handouts and adapting the materials to suit the needs of the individual groups of teachers.

Tight ‘scripting’ of seminars was not necessarily helpful in assisting trainers in delivering a differentiated seminar to individual groups of schools and teachers, as it inevitably restricted the scope for tailored engagement with groups of teachers in seminars. The detailed outline or ‘script’ generally consisted of a written document, compiled by the trainers, following a framework identified by the design team. Normally associated with this script were powerpoint slides and a range of resources. The role of the script in seminar delivery is articulated in the following two comments from PCSP co-ordinators:

We found from experience over the years that it was necessary to ask trainers to stick to the script

There has to be consistency and uniformity.

The centralised guiding philosophy underlying the PCSP seminars (support all subjects, each school must get the same, standardise delivery, use of script) may have limited trainers’ capacity to do anything other than present a broad generalised introduction aimed at the teachers and schools generally. It was subsequently the role of the RCSS to bring more locally sensitive contextualised support at school and teacher level.

Teachers should themselves adjust and customise the ideas from the PCSP

Interviews with the PCSP co-ordinators introduced another interpretation regarding differentiation of seminars, that it was in part up to the teachers to do “the best with it themselves” (PCSP co-ordinator). The provision of planning time for school staffs in most or all seminars reinforces this interpretation. It was hoped that these sessions would help teachers reflect on issues pertinent to their own context. To a certain extent this represents an aim to pass some of the responsibility back to teachers to become self-sufficient in their own professional development and assume greater ownership of their learning. As such, it can be viewed as a legitimate objective and approach.

The school-based planning days were viewed in the same way, an opportunity for staffs to make sense of the curriculum in their own context and plan for implementation. It is
not axiomatic that cuiditheoirí are required for this part of the process. The dialogue might be equally effective without cuiditheoirí – the views of some teachers in the focus groups support the hypothesis that teachers can contextualise the curriculum themselves, if given the time and space to do so.

**Generalised, universal seminars with RCSS providing for differentiation**

It appears that for most PCSP co-ordinators, differentiated support is provided by the cuiditheoirí and is, therefore, not an integral element of the seminars. The function of seminars was described by one co-ordinator as “to introduce the curricular area of the subject, key methodologies, changes in emphases, to give people experiences.” A consequence of this aim places a considerable responsibility on the RCSS to meet the need to provide differentiated support when working in schools and education centres. Chapter 4 highlights some reservations regarding the training provided to cuiditheoirí to enable them to fulfil this function. A significant proportion of the work of cuiditheoirí seems to be focused on helping to develop school curriculum plans and informing principals and teachers about available resources. The evaluation cannot say with certainty that cuiditheoirí are engaging with schools in the depth required to enable them make contextualised sense of the seminars or the curriculum more broadly.

### 6.3 System Context: Time Available to Facilitate Change

#### 6.3.1 The literature on time

The literature on professional development constantly highlights the allocation of sufficient time as a key issue affecting change at an individual and school level. For example:

*Time is one of the greatest constraints to any change process, whether at the individual, classroom, or school level* (Collinson and Cook, 2001: 266)

*Every analysis of the problems of change efforts that we have seen in the last decade of research and practice has concluded that time is the most salient issue* (Fullan and Miles, 1992: 570, cited in Collinson and Cook, 2001).
Collinson and Cook identify several time issues that impact upon teachers’ learning, which not only relate to the quantity of time available, but also to what is done with it to facilitative this process:

- discretionary time to learn
- discretionary time to share with colleagues
- common time with colleagues
- uninterrupted time
- unpressured time
- habitual time.

They found that the implications of undue restrictions to the above were:

- when feeling overwhelmed, teachers are less receptive to new knowledge
- an absence of discretionary time to learn means that teachers find it difficult to become comfortable with new knowledge
- when teachers do not feel comfortable with their new knowledge, they are less likely to share it with others
- teachers find it very difficult to have in-depth discussions on new ideas and strategies
- when teachers get together, the sharing of knowledge tends to be haphazard and fragmented
- when under pressure, teachers find it difficult to break habits, and tended to revert back to what they were used to.

Collinson and Cook argue that policymakers must consider the amount of time required for teachers to adopt new practices into their knowledge bases, taking into account their existing responsibilities. They comment:

*If teachers are already running as fast as they can to meet their scheduled responsibilities, then administrators need to be realistic about how new reforms are balanced with older priorities. That is, when something new is added, something else is subtracted* (Collinson and Cook, 2001: 276).
6.3.2 Time to facilitate change: The Irish context

In the context of the present evaluation, time emerged as a major factor affecting implementation of the Primary School Curriculum at a whole-school level and by individual practitioners. Interviews with system planners reveal that there is an awareness of the importance of time in respect of:

- time to plan
- time to meet other teachers to plan and work together
- time to engage with curriculum documentation
- time for the above needs to be built into a school timetable
- time to familiarise oneself with a subject before a new subject comes along.

The last point especially feeds into the second major obstacle, 'overload,' noted by principals in the school questionnaire. Many system planners also highlighted the fatigue and negativity amongst teachers that surfaces when teachers feel they are being overloaded with new information or new approaches to teaching. Teachers start off enthusiastic and positive towards the changes, but this disappears when they feel that they do not have enough time to assimilate one subject before another comes along. The system planners recognised from the outset that teachers needed time to assimilate the new and revised elements in the curriculum. Hence the decision to phase over a longer period than some had wished. It is significant that even with the longer timeframe the feeling of overload persists amongst teachers. Principals surveyed considered that the overall workload now expected of teachers represented the single greatest obstacle to curriculum planning, placing availability of time for such planning as the second greatest obstacle. The burden being placed on teaching principals by the curriculum change was also raised as an issue of concern by teachers participating in focus groups:

*You have to make allowances for the teaching principal, I mean they’re trying to get all these policies and everything in place, I know they get principals’ days, but you know you really can only do so much, by the time you get yourself organised and get all this stuff out, it takes a lot of time and they really feel snowed under with you know...I think they’ve had enough* (Teacher B, TFG3).
Similarly, teaching principals cited a lack of enthusiasm amongst teachers; indicating that perceptions of overload represent one of the single greatest obstacle to curriculum implementation.

6.3.3 Creating time to facilitate curriculum change

How can time be generated to allow for greater engagement with the curriculum by teachers, for greater discussion and collaboration between teachers, and for assimilation of new knowledge, so that feelings of overload can be avoided? Collinson and Cook (2001) suggest that a possible option for overcoming shortages of time is to re-conceptualise teachers’ employment year. The participants in their study reported that their most productive learning period, when they had most unpressurised time and more opportunities to meet with colleagues, was during the summer. In other words, Collinson and Cook suggest that it may be time for teachers to look upon their working year in terms of a 12-month year, as opposed to a 9-month year. Likewise, Trant and O’Donnabhain (1998) suggest that it is time to re-conceptualise the traditional format of the school day, and how classes are structured. They suggest experimenting with various learning groups, from team teaching to peer teaching, thereby releasing the teacher from the classroom environment for other activities such as teacher learning. Sugrue et al. (2001) speculated at that time that the benchmarking process within the National Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (Government of Ireland, 2000) offered an opportunity to initiate professional development in teachers’ own time. However, re-structuring the traditional school day and/or year in order to free up time necessary for the process of change to occur is a significant challenge facing the education community.

The effectiveness of a comprehensive and sustainable programme for professional development, that does not provide ‘time space’ for the various features of a change process to occur, will be limited. In structuring support for teachers for the remainder of the subjects on the Primary School Curriculum, the issue of lack of time, and its concomitant perceptions of overload need to be taken into consideration.
6.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored, in conjunction with relevant literature, selected issues in relation to the three main contexts (teacher, school, system) used to frame the present evaluation. The literature highlights the need to work within and, in cases, overcome teachers’ existing schema in relation to knowledge and practice. These existing practices are reinforced by teachers’ own understanding of the curriculum, perspectives that may or may not be consistent with policy-makers’ intents. Understandings of curricula can be transformed as they make their way from the official curriculum (documents) to the curriculum experienced by children. Such iterative transformations can complicate a cascading model of professional development and ought to inform development of such programmes.

Encouraging teachers to feel ownership of curriculum and professional development features strongly in the research. Consequently, it is to be expected that teachers will begin to interpret the curriculum at school and individual levels. This process can be both advantageous and potentially troublesome in relation to curriculum implementation. On the one hand, personal interpretation based on critical, independent reflection by teachers is to be welcomed; on the other, excessive reliance on published textbooks, resources and other material can lead to a dominant commercialisation of the curriculum that may or may not reflect policy aims. Teachers’ and children’s long term needs may be best served by forms of support for teachers that model creative, problem-solving, critical-thinking and constructivist approaches, and that facilitate teachers in becoming more self sufficient in relation to their own professional development needs.

Recognising the influence of the career stage of teachers has been considered to be a significant element in promoting curriculum change and in professional development in particular. The PCSP seems to have been relatively successful in accommodating the needs of teachers at different stages in their careers. There is evidence in the evaluation, as in the literature, that current approaches to professional development should be rebalanced to emphasise the integral relationship between professional identity and continuous teacher learning. Professional development should be an on-going feature of teachers’ professional lives and should be an integral part of teacher and school culture. In the context of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, the
locus of responsibility for professional development has rested very firmly with the DES. This is one-sided and not necessarily in keeping with best practice.

The crucial role of the principal in promoting curriculum reform at local school level is acknowledged in the literature and explored in this evaluation. Given the complexity of the role, it is clear that principals require dedicated support in a variety of areas, including curriculum leadership and the promotion of teaching and learning. There are lessons in this for future professional development initiatives targeted at whole-school staffs. The findings of this evaluation show a clear desire and need among principals for training designed to enable them to effectively support school change and teacher development.

In addition to the role of the principal, there are a variety of other school contexts in which teaching and learning occur. Professional development needs to be cognisant of these differing situations. Participants in the evaluation were, on the whole, satisfied with the way in which the PCSP seminars accommodated different school contexts. Cuiditheoiri should be enabled to work more directly with teachers in class in applying knowledge, skills and methodologies to their own school and class context. The recognition of different school and teacher needs, and the provision of differentiated support, is important in formulating future professional development. From the perspective of those responsible for providing the support, this evaluation identified three perspectives on how varying school contexts were accommodated.

The evaluation confirms previous research evidence that making time for teachers to plan, implement and assimilate change is critical to the success of reform agendas. Issues surrounding time were linked to perceptions of overload by teachers. The issues and complexity associated with time are reasonably well understood by policymakers and practitioners alike. Nevertheless, how to structure time for professional development remains a very significant challenge for the future.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation set out to assess the impact of the PCSP in promoting teachers' understanding of the Primary School Curriculum and in supporting actual implementation of the curriculum by teachers and schools. To gain a fuller understanding of the antecedents to impact, four broad aspects of the PCSP were investigated, namely:

1. establishment of the PCSP and underlying rationale and philosophy
2. design of the programme
3. management and implementation of the programme
4. impact of the programme.

A conceptual frame was developed consistent with current understandings of the systemic dynamics associated with reform initiatives and professional development for teachers. This conceptual frame posited three inter-related elements; contexts relating to teachers, schools and the education system; set against an overarching backdrop of approaches to instruction and learning.

The evaluation is intended to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the particular model of support adopted in the period 1999-present in the context of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum. The findings are used to develop a formative strategy to maximize the likely benefits to teaching and learning from professional development planned under the auspices of the PCSP in the coming 3-4 years. This chapter also outlines other, broader issues that should inform policy in the area of professional development more generally in the medium to long term.
7.1 Main Findings

7.1.1 Planning and establishment of the PCSP in relation to curricular needs

One of the main reasons for establishing the PCSP was to ensure that the work that had been invested in the development of the curriculum did not falter at the stage of implementation by schools. The particular model of professional development chosen was largely influenced by decisions in relation to phased implementation of the curriculum itself. Decisions about the pace of curriculum implementation and the form of professional development provided to teachers have had an influence on how the curriculum is perceived and mediated by teachers. As a result, it is doubtful whether a majority of teachers truly perceive the curriculum as an integrated construct. There is a sizeable body of opinion that there are core and peripheral curriculum areas.

The decision to provide support for teachers in relation to the curriculum was prudent for a number of reasons, including some reservations amongst teachers and principals in relation to the length and complexity of the curriculum documentation. Whereas the documents constitute the resource of first choice for teachers when planning for teaching, there is some unease about the format. Providing support in relation to individual subjects was probably the best initial form of support for teachers; there is need now, however, to move further and incorporate support in relation to the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning. At a minimum, consideration should now be given to providing simultaneous advice across a range of curriculum areas rather than in a subject-by-subject manner.

Achievement of more comprehensive, integrated support for teachers would be enhanced through closer co-ordination of the work of the PCSP and the SDPS. The evaluation detected confusion amongst teachers about the role of both agencies, there is evidence of cross-over between the support they provide, and little support was voiced in favour of the continued existence of both agencies as separate initiatives in the long term.

Advisory structures such as the Primary Curriculum Implementation Group, the Technical
Working Group and the PCSP Steering Committee were established at a very early stage to guide the process of support. In the main, the evaluators found broad support for the way in which the programme was managed, though there was a perception among some of the partners that the views of a small number of key partners were dominant. Greater consideration should be given, in the future, to ensuring that the perspectives of all the relevant education partners be accommodated as far as practicable. The partners themselves should take some responsibility for this.

7.1.2 Overall programme design

Overall design and decision-making

The overall design of the programme was informed by relevant theories of professional development. A highly centralised ‘cascade’ format was adopted and the enabling organisational structures established were consistent with this approach. The concept of the design teams was both innovative and generally effective but the operation of these groups varied from subject to subject.

Decision-making at the design stage was generally informed and effective, but some tendency existed to assign a greater weighting to the views of some partners than others. The use of seconded teachers as trainers resonated well with the broader teaching community and the involvement of education centres provided both a ready-made distribution network for the support and also brought the function and potential of the centres into sharper focus for teachers. The decision to forego separate support for principals contemporaneously with the support provided for teachers was criticised by principals and is inconsistent with the literature on school leadership. Taking the school as the primary educational unit, support was aimed at entire staffs, both through the seminar format and school-based planning days. The value of school-based professional development activities was acknowledged and the RCSS established to mediate the support at local level to schools and individual teachers.
The range of supports and activities eroded the teaching time available to children. This was reluctantly accepted as necessary by all the partners, though it was never intended that this scale of annual school closures would be sustained indefinitely. As such, the evaluation has concluded that creating time for professional development and continuing professional development remains one of the greatest challenges for educational policymakers. The timetabling of the PCSP seminars during school hours may have reinforced teachers’ perceptions that professional development occurs in school time. Creative solutions need to be found to ensure that structured professional development becomes an on-going feature of teachers’ professional life.

Training

Training of personnel as trainers and *cuiditheoiri* was based on the principles of adult education. Trainers and *cuiditheoiri* participated in training programmes, which were often indistinguishable from seminar and material development activities. Reported length and quality of the training varied from subject to subject. In general, participants felt that there was greater emphasis on upskilling in content areas than in the pedagogy effective for dealing with adult learners or in strategies to aid the differentiation of support material to schools and teachers of different contexts and characteristics.

7.1.3 Management and implementation of the programme

Scale and resources

The scale of the PCSP is unprecedented in Irish education. The complexity of the brief is acknowledged as is the professionalism and dedication of the many personnel involved. Many useful lessons have been learned about how professional development for teachers can be optimally structured in the future. The administrative capacity of the PCSP to provide support to all teachers nationwide in a range of subjects is widely lauded. ‘Delivery’ of the support is perceived as efficient, with targets generally being met.

A considerable amount of public money has been allocated to the PCSP. The evaluators
were not in a position to conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of the programme. However, as an initial programme to support the introduction of a curriculum, the annual per-teacher and per-child professional development-related expenditure does not seem excessive. The annualised approach to budget allocation to the PCSP from the ICDU complicates short and medium-term planning by the PCSP co-ordinators. There is a clear case to be made for multi-annual budgeting.

Though the results of internal evaluation procedures employed by the PCSP itself are generally accurately compiled, the data generated are of limited value. The specific nature and structure of the post-seminar questionnaire (typically one to two pages containing a small number of Likert items) used by the PCSP constrained the quantity of data collected from participants. The data collected tended to be broad, and as such, was of little practical use to decision-makers in a formative context. There was little scope afforded to participants to provide a comprehensive qualitative appraisal of the seminars. In the future consideration might be given to obtaining richer qualitative data on the basis of follow-up investigations with smaller numbers of teachers, individually or in groups. Such investigations might best not occur on the seminar day itself.

The programme of support could not have been provided to the same extent without the assistance of the education centre network. Providing locally-based administrators who know the schools and suitable facilities, the education centres have played an increasingly important role. Perceived difficulties in relation to suitability of facilities and clustering of schools became less prevalent as the programme matured.

The seminars

Teachers, in the main, expressed positive opinions about the seminars. They gained primarily in knowledge and understanding about the curriculum areas, with somewhat less gains reported in relation to methodologies. The seminars were valued also for the opportunity they provided to teachers and principals to network with staff in other schools. Certain key messages underpinned the seminars. Whereas many teachers could
subsequently identify many of these key messages as pertinent to the seminars and the curriculum, there was a certain level of confusion also.

Lecturing by trainers was a frequent pedagogical approach employed in seminars, though considerable amounts of time were spent in group or individual activities. There are some concerns about the quantity of material expected to be covered in seminars and the influence this had on the nature and quality of teachers' learning. Trainers reported that they received relatively little training in how to differentiate the content of the seminars in relation to different school and teacher characteristics and they often had no contextual information about schools in advance of seminars. Despite these drawbacks, there is evidence to suggest that the trainers succeeded in mediating the material to some, though not all teachers from different teaching contexts. Teachers in special schools and to a lesser extent, teachers responsible for multi-grade classes were an exception to this, however. The seminars were not differentiated for or wholly appropriate for the contexts of teachers serving children with mild, moderate or severe and profound general learning disabilities.

The Regional Curriculum Support Service (RCSS)

There was almost universal satisfaction with the RCSS from participants in the evaluation and overwhelming support for the long-term retention of the RCSS or some equivalent layer of support for teachers in conjunction with other forms of support. There is a perception that the RCSS can offer a more contextualised form of continuing support for teachers than is possible through seminars. *Cuiditheoiri* are most valued by principals and teachers for their assistance in relation to (i) school and individual curriculum planning, (ii) informing teachers about resources and (iii) highlighting practical classroom strategies. Principals and teachers raised specific concerns about the adequacy of current arrangements for facilitating *cuiditheoir* visits to schools. These concerns centred mainly on whether or not children should attend school on those occasions.

There is a need to move the RCSS away from a subject-specific model to a more integrated cross-curricular approach along with greater emphasis on generic pedagogic skills. There
are compelling reasons for restructuring the work of the PCSP and SDPS into one support agency in the long term.

Through the seminars, the school-based planning days and the RCSS, the PCSP has had considerable influence in determining the approach to curriculum planning adopted in primary schools in recent years. There are fundamental problems with approaches to and consequences of this planning. The PCSP, in conjunction with the SDPS and the Inspectorate, need to address these as a matter of urgency.

Whereas the concept of the RCSS offering contextualised advice to schools is widely perceived, there is some evidence to suggest that the service offers a relatively standardised, information-dominated form of support to schools and teachers. This suggests somewhat less contextualisation than imagined. The whole raison d’être for school-based professional development may not be best served by advice emanating solely from one provider. Teachers themselves do not believe that their future needs can be best met by the RCSS alone. There is a tradition in primary education of teachers acquiring advice from a range of “in-service” options and this plurality of provision and access is the best guarantee of genuine needs-based support for curriculum, teaching and learning.

7.1.4 Overall impact of the programme

Teachers were largely satisfied with the seminars and felt that they were useful. Relatively lower levels of satisfaction were recorded in relation to seminars and support in SPHE and literacy/Learning Support. A hierarchy of change can be observed whereby most change has occurred in relation to teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the strands and strand units. There is less evidence of change in teachers’ methodologies (and indeed there is some evidence of lack of change) whereas children’s experiences have changed relatively less than teachers’ knowledge. According to DES inspectors, where newer methodologies are observed in classrooms, there is a tendency for teachers to view the strategies as outcomes themselves rather than as methodological vehicles to promote children’s learning.
of specific content objectives.

Data from a range of focus groups and interviews indicate a fairly widespread belief that there is relatively little that is new in the 1999 curriculum and that teachers 'are doing it already.' This belief has the potential to inhibit change in general, and specifically in this case, the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum. The strategy of affirming existing practice aims to build teachers' confidence and to encourage them to embrace curriculum change in a positive light. Such an approach suggests that the innovation or change being presented is congruent or consistent with teachers' existing practices and is used to sell the change to teachers. Teachers' belief that the change is insignificant will adversely affect the likelihood of the change taking place. Change must be of a magnitude not to generate fear, but it must also be sufficient to require effort to implement it. The approach of affirming existing practice in the context of introducing change merits careful consideration as it may inadvertently serve to inhibit teachers' appreciation and hence actual implementation of the level of change required.

The programme of support has fostered change in whole-school curriculum planning. Schools operate more as units, displaying greater levels of professional dialogue between staff. Collaboration between schools has also been enhanced, particularly in the case of smaller schools through the PCSP clustering arrangements. There is some evidence of improved continuity of practice from class to class up through the grades. The Curriculum and Teacher Guidelines seem to inform teacher planning to a considerable degree, as do children's textbooks. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that textbooks still determine much of the specific content that children learn at present. Planning is not without its problems. There is a real need for a fundamental reappraisal of the extent of, approaches to, and time available for curriculum planning by schools.

The Review and Consolidation Year 2003-2004 was, in part, in response to a perceived feeling of reform-saturation on the part of teachers. The evaluation found widespread evidence of this perception, a perception that is still potentially debilitating to efforts at
further curriculum support and implementation. Teachers and principals feel that the workload involved in planning for and implementing the curriculum is overwhelming and this perception in itself is regarded as one of the greatest obstacles to further reform. There is some evidence that larger schools are exhibiting higher levels of implementation than smaller schools. Principals highlighted time and overload as obstacles to implementation. There are, however, lessons to be learned from the fact that large numbers of principals seem not to delegate responsibility for specific aspects of curriculum leadership to the middle-management layer in schools.

It remains to be seen whether or not the programme of support has created something of a dependency culture amongst teachers along the lines that the DES will ‘provide’ professional development to accompany any reform of curriculum in primary education. There is evidence to suggest that teachers are not taking ‘ownership’ of the curriculum, perhaps in part due to the nature of the support being offered. This may, in turn, contribute to a culture of dependency and may reinforce the belief that the DES will ‘provide’ the in-service. If true, this would be unfortunate in the context of teacher professionalism generally and a rich tradition amongst primary teachers of availing of in-service through a range of options including summer courses, courses offered by education centres and for-credit courses offered by the higher education sector.

As a formative evaluation, this study attempts to examine what has happened in the past with a view to maintaining and enhancing elements that have worked well and also promoting changes that would make the system more effective in terms of impact on teaching and learning. The next section reviews the lessons learned.
7.2 Lessons Learned

7.2.1 Lessons from the literature

Claxton (1996) suggests that the likelihood of teachers becoming involved in a learning process is influenced by:

- their own experiences as learners
- their perception of the need for learning
- existing demands on their time
- the rewards for such involvement.

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1990) outline the organisational supports that are necessary to make professional development work. These supports include:

- a school culture that values and supports collegiality and experimentation
- school leadership that is clear in its expectations and actively committed to supporting teachers’ efforts to change their practice
- emphasis on changes in curricular, instructional and classroom-management practices with improved student learning as the goal
- adequate professional development experiences with subsequent support that continues long enough for the new knowledge and skills to be incorporated into ongoing practice.

The work of Claxton and Loucks-Horsley reinforces the position of Guskey (2000) that it is necessary to think of creating a climate within a school that is conducive to both individual and whole-staff development.

In the United Kingdom, the professional development programmes found to be most
successful had the following common features (OFSTED, 2001):

- strong communication links between providers and stakeholders which were effectively used to identify central and local needs, inform course content and evaluate impact on pupil performance

- course content matched to the needs of participant teachers

- participants’ needs were identified at the start of each course, and systemically re-assessed throughout the course, and used as criteria for assessing effectiveness of training

- course content was closely aligned to teachers’ working experiences. Teachers demonstrated new practices in their classrooms and analysed the outcomes of such practices in light of new theories and concepts discussed during the courses.

A similar review by Lee (2000) confirmed that the professional development programmes that were found to be most successful were those that placed a strong emphasis on identifying learning needs at the bottom level, and adapting courses in response. The most effective activities had the following common features:

- opportunity to share ideas

- opportunity for practical experimentation

- activities related to teachers’ needs.

This study illustrates how activities that focus strongly on responding to the identified needs of the teachers were most effective in assisting the learning process, a finding consistent with Joyce and Showers’ (1988) model of effective professional development incorporating presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback and coaching.

In the context of centrally-driven reform such as the Primary School Curriculum, it is clear
that policy and programmes in relation to professional development must take cognisance of the multiple contexts in which teacher learning and development occurs, as highlighted in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1. The symbiotic influence of teacher, school and system factors suggests that there is unlikely to be one catch-all model that can be mapped onto the real needs of the 26,000 teachers working in the 3,286 primary schools in the country.

7.2.2 Needs analyses with teachers

The present evaluation sought to identify the areas in which teachers themselves feel that they require greatest assistance in relation to curriculum, teaching and learning. Teachers were asked to respond to a comprehensive list of areas in which they might wish to have additional support in the coming years. Table 7.1 presents the rank ordering showing the mean score for each area. The way in which the data have been scaled indicates that mean scores close to 4 are perceived as priority areas for teachers and scores that are closer to 1 are seen as less urgent. The rank indicates the overall average importance attached to the areas by teachers in relation to professional development.

These data present an insight into the professional development needs of teachers as perceived by themselves. On average, teachers indicated that they most need additional support in relation to catering for children with special needs, promoting problem-solving, differentiating the curriculum to suit children’s unique circumstances and the use of ICTs. Further needs relate to organising the curriculum at class level, collaborative learning, pupil assessment and planning at school level. Many of the issues identified relate directly to the principles of learning, the defining features of the curriculum and the key issues in primary education as espoused in the Primary School Curriculum. Issues such as clarifying the content of the curriculum (strands and strand units) and clarifying methodologies were not ranked highly by teachers, ranked 15th and 9th in importance respectively. Data such as these are very informative in helping to shape policy and emphases in respect of professional development at national, local, school and teacher levels.
Table 7.1 Teachers’ prioritisation of their own professional development needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area requiring support</th>
<th>Mean score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering for children with special needs</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering higher-order thinking and problem-solving</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiating the curriculum to suit children’s circumstances and needs</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using ICTs in teaching and learning</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organising the curriculum at classroom level</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil assessment</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organising the curriculum at school level</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying teaching methodologies appropriate for the curriculum</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the curriculum in an integrated way</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline / classroom management</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding how children learn</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking strands and strand units within subjects</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving parents as partners in implementing the curriculum</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying strands and strand units</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving parents as partners in planning the curriculum</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Teacher questionnaire

7.2.3 Continuing Professional Development in the context of professional practice

A ‘learned profession’ is characterised by high academic standards at point of entry, long periods of initial training, a commitment to pursuit of excellence in their profession and “a disposition towards defending that profession against any attempt to undermine it, to weaken it or to weaken it by lowering standards of entry, training or practices” (INTO 1992: 1).

The commitment to maintaining professional standards can be expressed in a number of ways, including a profession’s policy and approach to Continuing Professional
Development (CPD). Two main approaches to CPD can be identified in relation to other professions in Ireland. Firstly, members of some professions (e.g. law, accountancy) are required either by legislation or by rules established by the profession itself, to undertake a minimum number of prescribed hours of CPD over a set time frame (e.g. Government of Ireland, Statutory Instrument No.37, 2003). In the case of the legal profession, although the choice of CPD activities is at the discretion of individual solicitors/law companies in accordance with individual learning needs, failure to comply with CPD requirements may result in a solicitor’s Certificate of Practice being revoked. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland, the largest accountancy body in Ireland, has similar requirements in place for its members to ensure that standards of practice are up to date.

Alternatively, some professions, although not linking requirements for CPD with licences to practice, are equally committed to the pursuit of CPD. For example, An Bord Altranais, the statutory body with responsibility for the registration, supervision and education of nurses, expects that nurses/midwives must acknowledge any limitations in competency and take whatever measures are necessary to gain the competence required for practice (An Bord Altranais, 1988). Likewise, the representative body for professionally qualified architects in Ireland, the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI) requires members to take all reasonable steps to maintain an appropriate level of professional skills. Although, it is the responsibility of individual members to decide on the amount and type of CPD necessary for them, the RIAI makes recommendations as to how members can fulfill their CPD obligation, and strives to provide structures and services to support members in doing so through the provision of workshops, conferences, literature etc.

In education, the need for CPD for teachers is recognised by both the DES and by teachers themselves. The department’s White Paper on Education (Government of Ireland, 1995) acknowledges that there is a need for CPD for teachers:

*As with other professions, and because of changing social and economic circumstances, initial teacher education cannot be regarded as the final preparation for a lifetime of teaching.*
As with other professions, teachers have a personal responsibility to keep themselves abreast of new developments in their profession.

The Teaching Council Act, 2001, though not yet fully commenced, contains provisions in relation to professional development. One of the three objectives of the Teaching Council is to “promote the continuing education and training and professional development of teachers” (Government of Ireland, 2001: Section 6.c). A specific function assigned to the Council is to:

Advise the Minister in relation to ... the professional development of teachers [Section 7 (2) (h) (ii)]

The Act takes a relatively benign approach to professional development for teachers. It places no absolute requirement on teachers to engage with continuing education in order to renew their registration annually. Furthermore, Section 39 stipulates rather weakly that the Council will “promote awareness among the teaching profession and the public of the benefits of continuing education and training and professional development.” Despite the apparent tameness of this particular section of the Act, the Council is vested with the power to make additional regulations for the purposes of registration and fulfil an open-ended role in relation to performing “such other functions in relation to the continuing education and training and professional development of teachers as may be assigned to the Council by the Minister” [Section 39 (2) (d)].

7.3 Guiding Principles to Underpin Effective Professional Development

Based on the literature and on the findings of the present evaluation, the following is a summary of the principal features of effective professional development policy and practice, many of which are already in evidence in relation to the PCSP.

Guided by appropriate theory

Professional development activities for teachers should be guided by grounded theories about teaching and learning. Activities should be informed by theoretical models that
ensure that teachers are actively engaged in their own learning process. Theories of adult learning need to be incorporated into any model of professional development for teachers. As such, the provision of opportunities for active, experiential-based learning and critical reflection need to be accommodated.

**Informed by needs**

Professional development should reflect an equilibrium between meeting the needs of the teacher, the school and the system as a whole. This requires two interdependent processes; analysis of needs and differentiation of provision to best meet the needs identified. To promote differentiation it will be necessary to take into account contexts such as career stage of the teacher, school size and population served by the school.

**Collaboratively planned**

System-sponsored or “top-down” change can instill apprehension in those affected by it, particularly if they feel they have no voice in the change process. Representatives of all those required to implement change should be involved in the design stages of a programme of professional development. The experiences and insights of practising teachers and principals should be an integral part of the professional development process.

**Collaboratively structured**

Professional development activities should be collaborative in nature, allowing teachers to learn from their peers within and outside their own school situation and focus on participants’ identified needs and existing knowledge and experiences. Resources and structures (time, funding, external advice) should support the establishment of learning networks within and between schools.

**Flexibility**

Professional development activities should be well structured but flexible enough to allow changes following initial evaluations.
Combine theory and practice

Professional development activities should alternate course/seminar/workshop participation and practical learning experiences to enable teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Clear objectives underpinning system-sponsored reform

In the case of system-sponsored reform, such as implementation of new curricula, each individual professional development experience must be presented as part of and integrated with an overall coherent objective for change. Unless teachers and others required to implement change understand and are in agreement with the long-term overriding goal of professional development, change may be difficult to sustain.

Pace of reform

A professional development programme aimed at introducing large-scale change over a brief time span will face difficulties. Change should be introduced gradually to help overcome anxiety associated with loss of pre-existing knowledge and practice. As in the development of within-school and between-school learning networks, active consideration needs to be given to issues of (i) time for learning and reflection and (ii) overload on those charged with implementing the reform.

Provision of feedback

Regular feedback on the effects of a change on teaching practices needs to be provided if the changes are to be sustained. Changes will only be sustained and should only be resourced if they are perceived and/or proven to be effective. In the absence of regular feedback, it may be difficult to establish whether the changes are effective. Feedback is required at individual, school and system levels.

At individual level, follow-up support assists teachers to make sense of change in their own particular circumstances. This support should assist teachers in critically reflecting on their implementation of the changes that are being proposed. Private, independent reflection is
one useful but somewhat limited way of gathering feedback for the teacher. Paired or collaborative reflection, based on some observation of teachers’ actual practice, offers significant advantages. The choice of such reflection ‘soulmates’ should be made by individual teachers themselves and be drawn from amongst a teacher’s peers in the school or from other suitably qualified persons external to the school.

A number of mechanisms already exist for providing feedback at school level. These include the system of inspection by the DES and internal review of school plans as envisaged in the Education Act, 1998.

At national level, there is need to systematically monitor the effectiveness of programmes of professional development. Ideally this should combine elements of internal review by stakeholders with external evaluation by outsiders, planned and initiated from the outset and informing development of the programme.

**Follow-up support and pressure**

The provision of continuous follow-up, support and a measure of pressure following a professional development experience is essential to ensure that changes are effectively implemented. Follow-up support is required to help differentiate the elements of the professional development to teachers working in different contexts and to overcome any unforeseen implementation difficulties that emerge following the professional development program. Some element of pressure is required to be exerted on teachers/administrators to ensure that the change is in fact implemented, and not discarded following the professional development exercise.

**Systemic approach encompassing different contexts**

Effective professional development demands both individual and organisational/managerial change. To bring about change in one requires change in the other. A professional development programme that focuses only on individual change, without addressing the need for simultaneous organisational/managerial change, or vice versa, will be ineffective.
The development of such an interdependent, symbiotic environment is enhanced by appropriate training for school leaders in the processes of leading and facilitating change.

**Fostering independence**

One of the purposes of any centrally-orchestrated programme of professional development should be to enable the learner to become less dependent on the structures of the programme over time and to seek out independent learning experiences. Participants should also be able to generalise newly acquired knowledge and skills, accessing and constructing more elaborated learning as required. This brings into sharp relief the interplay between structured system and school-initiated professional development and more flexible, personalised learning, continuing education and training.

In summary, professional development is a process that is intentional, ongoing and systemic (Guskey, 2000). In other words, the process must have an overall, clearly defined, long-term objective against which actual results can be evaluated. All professional development efforts, whether at an individual or organisational level, must complement each other in working towards a common goal. Finally, due to the fact that education is a knowledge base that is always expanding and changing, educators must keep up with this expanding knowledge base, and therefore as part of their day-to-day activities, teachers should be habitually re-assessing the effectiveness of their own practices, and looking for opportunities to learn.

**7.4 Towards a Coherent Framework for Professional Development for Teachers in Ireland**

As already noted it is not necessarily helpful to advocate one 'model' of professional development that can be simplistically 'fitted to' the teaching profession at primary level. Given what we know from the literature and from the findings of the present evaluation, it is preferable to re-conceptualise professional development so that it better reflects the varied contexts in which it is supposed to apply and make a difference. As such, there is a
place for initiatives such as the PCSP, designed to support centre-led or top-down reform agendas. It makes good sense to continue to focus such initiatives on the school as the primary unit of change. Research also suggests, however, that there is a need to shift away from centrally-led professional development, towards placing the onus on individual schools to take responsibility for the professional development of their own teachers, in line with the schools’ own needs (Craft, 2000; OECD, 1998; Cheng and Walker, 1997). There is a balance to be struck “in which teachers feel some ownership in their development, yet are still part of a co-ordinated strategy for change” (OECD, 1998: 54). Finally, the personal professional needs of the individual teacher should to be taken into account.

It is firstly necessary to form a long-term coherent policy in relation to professional development for primary teachers in Ireland. Already, in relation to the summer courses on which large numbers of teachers regularly enroll, there has been a blurring of the distinction between individual and school orientation, with some school staffs opting to take or make courses as a unit. With the internal DES restructuring resulting in the creation of a Teacher Education Section, never has the opportunity been greater to bring coherence to continuing education for teachers. A systemic approach to professional development should be pursued, one that encompasses national, school-based and individually-prioritised professional development.

7.4.1 Professional development to support nationally-prioritised needs

Where major reform of national curricula are proposed, there is a place for centrally-co-ordinated support, particularly support designed to disseminate information about the changes and allay teacher apprehensions. Too little support, and the goodwill of teachers may be lost; too much support and their own initiative may be stifled. The PCSP was based on teams of seconded teachers delivering seminars and then offering site-based support to schools. Putting both elements in place should be conceptually and logistically straightforward; getting the balance right, somewhat less so. The comments here should be tempered by the realisation that it is unlikely that future revision of curriculum will be of
the simultaneous scale witnessed in the development and publication of the Primary School Curriculum. Continual and gradual review and adjustment of curriculum is more likely in the future.

• The critical place of research-based evidence in informing the particular content of the advice to teachers during professional development ought not be forgotten. It appears logical that greater use should be made of existing knowledge and expertise in the higher education sector when designing and delivering professional development. Rather than concentrating provision centrally (albeit in a geographically distributed ‘cascading’ model), provision can be equally effectively co-ordinated across a range of accredited providers such as education centres, colleges of education, universities, private agencies etc.

• Education centres offer a wide platform for delivery of courses and for facilitating communities of practice locally. They also offer a suitable vehicle for gathering information on school and teacher needs in advance of support being formulated.

• Seminars/workshops are important in disseminating information about curriculum and should form part of the response to teachers needs. There is however a greater potential for engaging teachers in critical, reflective thinking and activity in relation to the curriculum during the school planning days and subsequent support than during the seminars.

• The typical balance between seminars and school-based planning days should be reversed. The planning days should be reconstituted as reflection days, with less emphasis on school curriculum planning and more opportunity provided to teachers to collectively reflect on and consider the methodologies of the programme and its implementation. It may be possible that seminars can be usefully modified to involve relatively larger numbers of teachers in a format that concentrates on providing information to teachers about changes in the content and methodologies of
the curriculum.

- If the curriculum is to be promoted as an integrated entity, support, including seminars and reflection days should be multi-disciplinary. Personnel engaging with schools and teachers (whether from a central agency or from other providers) should have the capacity to work with teachers in a multi-disciplinary manner.

- It is necessary to maintain some level of support for the professional development process after the initial training and activities have taken place. Without such support, there is a strong risk that the teachers will revert back to what they previously knew and did. Continuing support can be provided by a central agency or by approved providers familiar with the preceding support provided.

- The effectiveness of the supports should be systematically monitored and the resultant information used to modify provision.

7.4.2 Professional development to support school-prioritised needs

Arising from, as well as separate to, the centrally-prioritised initiatives, schools as units should be encouraged to take responsibility for the professional development of their own staff, by formally and systematically identifying lacuna in their knowledge, skills and provision and taking steps to address them. Curriculum and other aspects of teaching and learning should be periodically reviewed and implications for professional development at staff level addressed. Each school should receive an annual or multi-annual budget to be dedicated for professional development. This should be a realistic budget that reflects a serious belief in and commitment to the intrinsic worth of professional development. The principal, in consultation with staff could use this budget to address priority issues, drawing on a wide range of providers. Issues of when to conduct the professional development (in or out of school time etc.) need to be discussed at national level between the DES and representatives of teachers. Possibilities for clustering with other schools and forming communities of practice within and between schools can be explored under the school-
prioritised dimension.

Monitoring of the effectiveness of the professional development is a critical element to the in-school strategy. Effectiveness criteria should be identified in relation to improvements in children's learning and to changes to teaching practice.

7.4.3 Continuing professional development to support teacher-prioritised needs

The context in which teachers work also needs to be considered if any programme of support is to successfully engender long-lasting change. So too must policy take into account the professional and personal lives of teachers if professional development is to be successful (Hargreaves, 1993, in Huberman, 1993).

One of the most powerful influences in teaching is choice. In approaching their career and the specific functions of their position, teachers make choices that define their day, their week and their career. Oftentimes teachers make choices that fuel further professional growth or inhibit such growth (Yager, 1991 in Steffy et al., 2000). Huberman (1993: 262) noted the paradoxical situation that whereas teachers undertake to guide children in the course of their development, many teachers themselves pay relatively little attention to “their own situation and their own professional future.” It can be argued that, in light of the numbers of teachers attending summer courses, the findings of Huberman in relation to Swiss teachers do not apply to the Irish context. However, reasons why teachers take such summer courses vary, at least some of which relate to the availability of discretionary extra personal vacation (EPV) days that can be taken during the school year. The words of one principal in the evaluation highlight the importance attached by teachers to the EPV days: “if people weren’t getting course days, how many teachers would take a course in the summer?” It must be acknowledged that education centres have, for many years however, successfully run evening courses for teachers, courses for which no EPV days were on offer. The evaluation did see evidence from the education centres themselves that teachers may be making more use of the centres now for consulting about ICTs, holding meetings
and obtaining advice and support in relation to curriculum areas.

There are clear reasons for promoting, amongst teachers, more systematic reflection on their professional lives and placing on them the onus of maintaining and enhancing their professional capacity. Continuing professional development should be part of what being a professional is. Accordingly, the following is suggested by the evaluators:

- Building on sections 31 (4); 33; and 39 (2) (d) of the Teaching Council Act, 2001, the Teaching Council should ensure that one condition of registration as a teacher/principal is demonstrated commitment to continuing professional development.

- The precise details of the requirements on teachers should be developed by the Teaching Council. Without prejudice to the deliberations of that body, it seems to the evaluators that the following issues would be worth considering:
  
  - Each teacher would form an individual CPD plan to cover a multi-annual period of time, say, 3 years. In developing this programme, teachers would be encouraged to seek advice from other relevant personnel such as school principal, teaching colleagues, DES inspector, PCSP cuiditheoir etc.
  
  - Where feasible, the individual CPD plan should be consistent with the school-level plan for professional development for staff.

  - Existing requirements for other professions reviewed by the evaluators generally require or recommend CPD in the form of hours contact time, of the order of 20 hours per year, with some provision to achieve this averaged over a 3-year cycle.

  - A range of providers should be encouraged to offer suitable opportunities for teachers to undertake CPD. Web-based provision should be possible.
Possibilities for accreditation and the accumulation of credits in relation to CPD should be actively investigated. Negotiations could be undertaken with existing third-level institutions and with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) or equivalent structure.

Certain issues about the granting of EPV days for existing summer courses need to be resolved. It would be problematic if, within the framework for CPD as part of continuing registration for teachers, some CPD experiences such as summer courses ‘offered’ EPV days to teachers whereas others did not (e.g. CPD courses/experiences undertaken during the year, in the evenings or weekends). The sensitivities associated with EPV days should not be underestimated.

Part, if not all, of the costs to teachers of meeting their registration requirements for CPD could be met either through modification of the existing fee remission scheme run by the DES or by a new system of tax credits and/or deductions applied to teachers’ revenue obligations.

When considering the issue of making ‘space’ for professional development for teachers, there is a tendency in the international literature to propose ‘restructuring’ teachers’ contracts to apply over a 12-month year, as noted in Chapter 6. This interpretation is not considered by the evaluators to be immediately feasible in the Irish context because teachers’ contracts are generally not with the DES, but with individual Boards of Management and achieving such a ‘restructuring’ would probably come at great cost in terms of teacher alienation and demoralisation. CPD ‘in teachers’ own time’ at times and places convenient for them is preferable. Financial incentives linked to accumulated post-graduate credits might be an issue worth considering.
7.5 Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 summarises the main findings of the evaluation. Based on the literature and the findings of the evaluation, guiding principles to underpin and inform future professional development initiatives have been developed. These include the need to be informed by theory, practice and teachers’ needs, to be collaboratively planned and structured by all those involved in the change process, and to provide feedback and follow-up support for teachers.

A long-term coherent framework in relation to professional development for teachers in Irish primary schools should now be developed. Such a framework should encompass national, school-based and individually-prioritised professional development.

Continuing professional development should be part of teachers’ lives. There is a need to promote amongst teachers, more systemic reflection on their professional lives and to place on them the onus of maintaining and enhancing their professional capacity.
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